

## **Long Hot Summer** by PseudonymMcWriter

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**Summary:** Stranger Things Season 3. In the middle of a baking hot summer, Hawkins finds itself once again drawn into the Upside-Down.

# 1. Lights Out

## Chapter One

### Lights Out

All was calm outside the Wheeler house. The sun had been slow in setting, sluggish from a long, hot day, and even when darkness finally did come there was still a balmy feel to the evening. The window to the basement was foggy with condensation despite being pushed open as far as it would go, and a warm orange light came from within. Birds were tweeting, neighbours were laughing, a bicycle squeaked by. All was calm except—

"YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

The basement was so hot it was difficult to breathe, but somehow Dustin had managed to get a good lungful. Eleven looked at him in alarm, and then to Mike as he sat smirking at Dustin from the head of the table. He inhaled, getting ready to tell the story of exactly how screwed Dustin's dwarf was, but Dustin was quicker. Leaning over the table to shield his miniature with his hand, Dustin looked around defensively.

"That's not fair, I totally would have seen with Darkvision."

"Sorry, you weren't paying attention." Mike said. "You were too busy looking at all the gold."

"I was multitasking!"

Lucas leaned forwards to push Dustin's hand away from the board. "Your turn's over, man."

"No way! You think I wouldn't have noticed if there was a giant monster right in front of me?"

Max interjected, "We don't know that it's a giant monster yet."

"Yeah, it could all be fine," Will added.

Eleven said nothing, looking between the quarrelling party members and the dungeon master who was sitting in amused silence, stroking an imaginary beard. This game was still new to her, and she was afraid to say anything just in case she was wrong. She was as quiet and still as her character miniature, the tall mage stood away from the group, watching them walk right into Mike's trap. There was still tension in the air when Dustin eventually resigned himself to his fate. Eleven was too hot in the jumper Hopper had given to her, and she reached up to itch at where sweat was soaking into the collar. Dustin took off his cap, unleashing the mass of curls hidden beneath as he swept a hand across his shining brow. He hadn't told anyone what products he'd been using in his hair, but they all knew that the sudden increase in volume was something to do with Steve Harrington.

Mike took his time delivering the blow. The folder stood open in front of him hid the miniature, but they could all hear Mike rattling it against the wooden table in his calculated effort to build suspense.

"The gold glimmers in the dungeons, bewitching in its size and splendour. But hidden in the darkness is something so horrifying that soon even the dwarf forgets the gold... but too late. The monster is already upon them." Mike slammed the miniature down, and everyone except Eleven groaned. "The Re-Animator."

"What? That's not—" Dustin began, but Max shushed him. They sat staring at Mike, waiting for him to tell them about this new monster.

"A monstrosity long lost to the realms of the living, the Re-Animator appears not as a man – although his size and shape may make it seem that way – but instead as a writhing mass of worms. These worms fall from him now to wriggle on the floor and from his deathly presence oozes a clear substance that slithers towards you, only to rise up and solidify as gelatinous cubes that surround you all, blocking the way out." Mike takes a quick look around, fixing a pointed look at Max and El. "Anyone want to roll for an escape?"

"I do," Max said at once. Eleven rolled too, once Mike had given her another pointed look, but it was in vain: Max was the luckier of the two, and her 'zoomer' was the only one to escape before the clear gel surrounded them. Once that was done the dungeon master turned

back to Dustin, who looked like he'd been hoping Mike had forgotten him.

"The Re-Animator saw the dwarf long before he was seen himself. He has the element of surprise, which he intends to use *fully* to his advantage."

"You are so screwed," Lucas said, but his own voice was shaking. Dustin had gone pale.

"One of the worms wriggling at the Re-Animators feet slithers straight towards the dwarf, too fast for him to counter. It climbs his short legs with ease, and buries itself in his beard, aiming for the mouth."

Dustin was clutching his cap now, holding it tight against his mouth as he mumbled incoherently. Mike wasn't finished.

"A few moments pass... The dwarf does not move... Until suddenly... He turns... His eyes white and wild with rage..." Mike reached over the board to turn Dustin's miniature to face the rest of the party. "The Re-Animator chuckles. A horrible, whining chuckle."

Eleven shuddered when Mike did his impression, her own throat tightening at the thought of the worms.

"*You can fight me...*" Mike whispered, the Re-Animator speaking through him. "*But can you fight each other?*"

Mike began to laugh maniacally.

There was a loud pop, and the light went off, plunging them into darkness.

All at once, everyone in the room began to panic. It was as if the miniatures on the board had become real, and the Re-Animator and his vile worms and gelatinous ooze had materialized in the room with them. Someone was screaming, and it wasn't until the group had all vaulted the stairs and tumbled out into the main hall of the Wheeler house that they realized it was Lucas. Max punched his arm.

"It was a power cut, dummy." Her tone was convincing enough, but her cheeks had turned pink. Mike was breathing heavily, all of his

confidence as the dungeon master left in the basement below. Dustin was swearing. Lucas was stood as close to Max as he could get. As the initial shock ebbed away, Mike moved away from the group.

"Look, the lights outside have gone out too," He said, pointing through the living room to where the windows faced the street. Reassured by the idea that it wasn't just them that had been affected, they all began to calm down. They were all so quick to forget it, to pretend it was nothing. Perhaps they really believed it *was* nothing. All except for Will and Eleven. They looked at each other, seeing themselves reflected in the others' wide fearful eyes. They had both felt it.

The Upside-Down was reaching out again.

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The night was young, and Hopper felt like he was back in high school. It wasn't because of the heat - the summers had never been this warm - and it wasn't the buzz of alcohol in his belly. No, it was the woman sat in the passenger's side, with the warm wind playing in her thick brown hair. Joyce Byers. She'd chastised him heavily enough for driving her around with a bellyful of beer, but now she was laughing at his stories and telling her own ones in return. She'd taken her sunglasses off, and her eyes were soft and her smile big and bright. She looked young, and beautiful. But the moment that crossed his mind Hopper remembered Bob, and suddenly he felt old again. Joyce seemed to sense the change in him.

"Are you okay?" She asked, cutting her story short. "I told you not to dri—"

"I'm fine." He said, a little too sharply.

Joyce sat up a little straighter, but she didn't say anything for a while. She didn't have to. She knew what he was thinking about, because she thought about it too. Watching the smile fade from his mouth, and his eyes turn glassy and distant, only made her realize what people must see when her mind turned to the Upside-Down... to everything that had happened.

"Do you think it's over?" He asked.

"I don't know, Hop."

He looked across at her, but she had turned to look out of the window. "At least we know what we're dealing with now."

He had said it just to comfort her, but they both knew it rang false. Joyce's jaw set. "We don't know what we're dealing with. But it doesn't matter. Whatever happens, we'll protect them."

Hopper looked across at her again and this time she looked back. They smiled at each other. The wheel jerked beneath his hands and Hopper's heart leapt into his throat. *Idiot. Why did you have to drink?* But when he looked back to the road there was nothing in front of him, and when he checked the rear-view mirror there was nothing he'd left behind either. The road ahead was clear, but something was amiss.

"Hop..." Joyce began. "The lights."

There were no lights. The streetlights, the car lights, the lights from inside the houses along the street. Every single one had gone out. The wheel gave another shudder and the engine *screeched*. Joyce covered her ears but Hopper kept his hands firmly on the wheel, doing his best to guide the car to the side of the road before it shuddered and went dead. Neither of them spoke, they just got out of the car. Hopper went around to check the engine, but Joyce went further down the street, as if she intended to walk the whole way back to the children. In truth Hopper was not opposed to the idea, but if the engine could be salvaged it would be faster to drive. They were still some distance away from the Wheeler's house.

"Joyce, can you see if you can borrow someone's phone?" He called out to her, if only to keep her from leaving him behind. He watched her run off towards the nearest house before he turned his attention back to the engine. By the time Joyce came back he'd fixed it, or at least done enough to get the car started again. Good thing too.

"The phones are dead!" She cried, and Hopper could hear the hysteria creeping into her voice. *If anything happened to Will...*

"We don't need them," He said, "Let's go."

Half of their journey was already over when the car died, but it was still some distance to get to the Wheeler's. Joyce and Hopper had spent the evening at the new mall, on the very outskirts of the town. As it turned out the drive was shorter than usual. They passed dozens of cars stranded on the side of the road, each one with people crowded around trying to restart it, leaving the road clear for them to drive right by. The car had barely stopped when Joyce jumped out, sprinting across the lawn to the Wheeler's. Hopper was right behind her when the door opened, and the two kids came racing to meet them. Jane launched herself into his arms, and Will into Joyce's. She almost fell to her knees with Will in her arms, and Hopper almost lifted Jane into the air, but there was something in the stiffness of her shoulders that stopped him. Instead he crouched to her level.

"Jane, are you—"

The girl shook her head furiously, and looked back at Will, who was looking right back at her.

"What?" Hopped asked immediately. "What is it? What's happened?"

Jane's mouth opened but it was Will who spoke first. "A light went out. We were all in the basement." He looked at Joyce. "It was scary."

By this time the other kids were coming out of the house too. Jane was burning up in his arms, but that could've just been the heat.

"Are you kids okay?" Hopped called across. Most of them nodded.

"No!" Dustin cried. He threw his hat onto the ground. "My dwarf is in deep, deep shi—"

"Okay, I think we get the idea." Joyce interrupted. She was laughing, relieved that her son was safe. She hadn't seen the look between him and Jane. It was enough to alleviate the tension long enough for Joyce to get the kids back inside, and for Hopper to check on the car again. As if that was all it took to fix everything, the lights suddenly came back on, and Hopper found his car working as if it was back to normal. Still, there was something about it, and about that look, that made him wary.

"Jonathan's picking us up," Joyce told him the moment he stepped back inside.

"A telepath, a mind reader, am I the only normal one around here?" He said, but one look at her soft brown eyes made him smile. Then he sighed. "I'll have to take the car down to Hal's." Hopper pinched his nose. "Could you—"

"We'll look after her while you're gone, of course." Joyce waved her arms as if he was silly for thinking she wouldn't. She was probably right. He wanted nothing more than to stay there with her, with Jane, with Will and Jonathan. It felt wrong, leaving them behind, even if it was for a moment.

"I'll get going now. But first..." He stepped further into the house. "Do you think the Wheeler's will mind me borrowing the phone for a minute too?"

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Hal, a weathered old mechanic with wiry limbs and a nasty scowl, was lounging in a chair behind the counter, and was so engrossed in his Scoops Ahoy cone that he didn't even notice Hopper come in. It wasn't until he was standing right in front of him, gazing down at the top of his balding, liver-spotted head, that the man graced him with a glance.

"Speak to Christine." He took a bite of his ice cream. "In the back."

Hopper started towards where the office opened up into the garage workshop. When he looked back he caught Hal cringing, his hand on his head. *Brain freeze*. Hopper rolled his eyes, but the bang and clank of metal drew his attention back to the workshop. It was bigger than it looked from the outside and crammed full of bits of machinery and tools he didn't really recognise. The sound was coming from the back of the workshop, where the night sky peeped in from beneath an open roller door. Trying hard not to knock anything over, and sighing over the effort of it, Hopper made his way over. At the sight of two acid-washed jean legs sticking out from beneath a car, he cleared his throat.

"Christine?"



Two strong arms gripped the underside of the car and a girl, not much older than Nancy, came wheeling out to look up at him. She took her time sitting up, "Haven't seen you in a while, Hop. How's things?"

"Uh. Same old, same old." Hopper gave her a hand up. "Jesus, kid, you're almost as tall as I am."

"It's all the eggs." Christine flashed him a grin, giving an involuntary flex of her muscles, "Three a day."

"Yeah? Is that your opening line on dates?"

"Yeah, well, let's not get into that..." Christine reached to muss up her bleached curls before quickly changing the subject. "You have something for me to fix?"

"Yeah, maybe..." Hopper was looking out through the open garage door. "Looks like you've got a lot of things to fix."

Within a poorly-maintained wire-link fence and illuminated by blinking electric lights, rows and rows of cars in varying states of disrepair stood rusting in the yard. Christine gave a noncommittal shrug, "I can handle it."

"Have these all come in recently?"

"In the last month or so, yeah." She paused. "It's a good thing, we need the money and I didn't fancy getting a part-time job at the Gap. Anything that can't get fixed gets scrapped and sold."

"Your uncle have a licence for selling parts?" Hopper wasn't really thinking when he said it, his mind was on the power outage – on the way the engine had screeched and all the lights had went out at once. He felt like he was on a stage and the cars were his audience, and every pair of blank headlights was a pair of eyes looking back and mocking him.

"Don't ask me. He's the brains, I'm just the muscle."

They both looked back towards the office, where Hal was suffering from another bout of brain freeze. "Somehow I doubt that."

Christine followed him through the workshop and out to where his car stood out front. He'd left it unlocked and as he described the problems to her Christine went straight to the passenger side.

"Speaking of dates—" Christine interrupted him, retreating from the car with Joyce's sunglasses in her hand. "Well, thank God. I was starting to worry."

"Very funny, but you won't find the problem in there."

"I'll say." Christine put the sunglasses back whilst he went around to pop the hood. When she came for a look, her grin disappeared at once. "What the hell..."

Hopper looked at her, "You've seen this before?"

"Yeah, recently. Some cars from outside the swimming pool, some from near the mall. I don't understand it. It's fried, but it's like... I don't know. It's like an electrical surge but not from the battery."

"From something stronger?"

"Yeah. A lot stronger," She looked from the car to the police chief. "What are you thinking?"

"I was hoping it was kids messing with people's engines."

It was a lie, but even so Christine's expression put an end to that idea before she even had to speak. "I can't see how it would be. It sounds obvious but this looks like it only affects cars while they're running. Unless a kid could somehow fit a generator in there, set it to blow when the car's already moving, and then get it out before it makes it to me... Did you come straight here?"

"More or less." Hopper closed the hood. "Can I leave it with you?"

"Sure, of course."

"You need help getting it into the shop?"

"No, that's okay, just leave the keys with me. I'll let Uncle Hal know. You okay to get home?"

Hopper opened his mouth to reply, but as he did he heard an engine rumbling closer. A pair of headlights lit up the road behind them as Steve Harrington slowed to a halt. Hopper turned to smile at Christine, "Thanks, let me know when it's ready."

"Will do." Christine gave a curious glance at Hopper's driver, before waving him off. When the police chief pulled open the passenger-side door – an arrangement that set him slightly off-kilter – he found Steve looking away quickly from where the girl was retreating into the garage.

"Everything okay?"

"Uh..." Hopper scratched at his hairline, which seemed to him like it was creeping further and further back by the day. *Had I really felt young today?* "Don't know, yet. Thanks for the pick-up."

"Don't mention it," Steve pulled the car away. "Did they say anything about the cars? I saw people stranded as I was driving up."

"No," Hopper said, "But if your car was fine then it couldn't have reached as far as the mall."

"Well... Do you think it's to do with that thing? The weird dogs?" Steve kept looking across at him, which was quickly pushing Hopper's mood to the edge.

"I don't know, kid. Maybe." He sighed, finding himself unable to sit still.

"But Jane closed the door, right? I mean... Shouldn't it all be over now?"

"I don't know. They don't really teach you about this kind of thing in police training."

"Well... I wouldn't know about that." Steve murmured. Hopper shut his eyes. *Shouldn't have said that.*

"Look, kid—"

"I'm not going to start, okay? *But* what I'm saying is that if there is

something going on, especially if it is to do with those monsters, then maybe I should know about it. I have the work experience, you know? I know how to protect and serve against... against all of that." Steve's impassioned speech ended on an awkward note. *He's put thought into this.* It wouldn't have surprised him if Steve had rehearsed this conversation on his way here.

"Consider your point made," Hopper massaged his temples. "Now give me some time to contemplate."

"Okay, just... think about it." It wasn't the response Steve was looking for, but he must have known he shouldn't have expected anything better because he didn't ask again. It wasn't until they were coming up towards the Byers' that Hopper felt like he had to say something.

"How's things at Scoops Ahoy?"

"Amazing. The mayor's visiting the mall soon so it's all hands on deck," Steve deadpanned. "At least it's cold."

The car came to a sudden stop, and Hopper turned to see the warm lights of the Byers house shining back at him. Something Steve said had nudged something at the back of his mind, but one look at Jane watching him from between the curtains pushed it out of his head.

"You need a lift back to yours?"

"No. Thanks, Steve."

Steve nodded, "Tell them I said hi."

The air was still hot and clammy, and now there wasn't so much as a breeze to give some relief. Hopper heard the car begin to move away and on a sudden whim he turned to wave goodbye, but Steve didn't see. He wanted to help the kid out but it wasn't as easy as that. Although, with the mayor's interference, it wasn't out of question that Harrington's father could get him a place on the force whether Hopper wanted him or not. For now, though, the budget couldn't support it, and Steve wasn't a good enough applicant to justify a hire, at least on paper. It wasn't like Hopper could tell the truth about everything he'd done. He knew Steve was right to be angry – it wasn't

fair.

The door opened before Hopper reached it and Jane came running out to wrap her arms around his waist. He didn't think he'd ever get used to that. It was too familiar. Too much like Sara. It was enough to choke a man up. He made sure to clear his throat before Joyce came to the door.

"You're back," She said, "Can they fix the car?"

"Christine said she'll have a look at it. We're not the only ones." Jane was still clinging to his midriff so he manoeuvred them both carefully inside, taking care to shut the door behind him. It was cooler inside, with metal fans creaking in every corner of the room. Jonathan was reclining on the sofa with Nancy, the different wind currents from all the fans stirring their hair. They gave a small wave when they saw him. Mike and Will were sat on two cushions by the TV, and a third lay unoccupied but dented beside them. He looked down at Jane.

"You've been good for Joyce, right?"

Jane smiled up at him. "Good."

Joyce was smiling too, "They've been watching Ghostbusters." She laid a hand on Jane's shoulder as the girl finally detached herself and went back to sit with the boys. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Yeah, sure. Joyce, do you mind if I use your sofa tonight? I didn't want to put Steve out anymore—"

"Of course, Hop, of course. Mike and Nancy are spending the night too. I've had Karen on the phone, their car's ruined too." Joyce paused, and her lips worked in that nervous way they always did now. "It'll be nice for the kids. I think it's good to all be together."

Hopper looked towards where the kids all sat together; at Jonathan and Nancy talking in lowered voices on the couch; at the three kids laughing and fighting each other to quote the film first, and he felt that same niggling sensation in his mind and in his gut.

"Yeah. I think so too."

## 2. Starcourt Mall

### Chapter Two

#### Starcourt Mall

Steve woke with a start, his heart beating fast. He'd been on the verge of sleep, trapped in dreams that felt so real his sudden return to the waking world came as a shock and he sat bolt upright, sweat moist on his brow. Almost every night he spent underground, back in those tunnels, and every day he was at the mall. He reached over to fumble with the alarm. *I think I'd take the tunnels over Scoops Ahoy.*

He dragged himself out of bed and made his way, bleary-eyed and grumbling, to the bathroom. He could hear his mom sleeping in his parents' room, but he knew his father would already be at work. After a quick shower and a few puffs of the ol' Farrah Fawcett, he dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. The house was quiet, the pool outside shimmering under the morning sun. It was going to be a hot day; thinking of how busy the mall would be filled him with dread. *Or maybe it's just the pool.* Sometimes he forgot that that was where it had happened. Where Barbara had...

**BEEEEEP**

Steve almost jumped out of his skin. Just like that the loud, blaring car horn had shattered what could have been a tranquil morning. It took all of his willpower to drag himself out to the car, but as soon as he was in the drive he picked up the pace pretty quick.

"Knock it off, my mom's asleep." Even at close range he had to yell to be heard over the car horn Robin was leaning on.

"Oops, sorry." To her credit she did look genuinely ashamed, no matter how much she tried to play it off. She straightened, her uniform still wrinkled from the day before.

"Gross, don't you have a washing machine?"

Her head rolled onto one shoulder, her eyes hidden behind shades

and her mouth open obnoxiously wide as she chewed gum. "Nope, I'm a real mess. What about you? Going for a casual look on the mayor's big day? That's bold."

Steve refused to wear his uniform outside of the food court so it was packed away in a backpack, which he threw with unnecessary force into the backseat. Sliding into the passenger side he slammed the door shut. "Thanks for reminding me."

"What – you forget about the mayor? I haven't been able to get him off my mind for days."

Steve pulled a face, but when Robin looked ahead he allowed himself a small smile. Robin was a... character, but she made the days at the mall a little more bearable. She had about same tolerance for bullshit that he did, at least.

The roads were clear the whole way there, which made the journey go by way too quick. The stranded cars had been moved away in the days after the outage, and as quick as that people were forgetting it ever happened. His thoughts went to the garage he'd picked the chief up from a few nights before. *They might even be busier than me.*

He hadn't exactly believed that'd be the case, but he was still disappointed to face more people that morning than there were cars in Hawkins. By lunchtime his legs had turned to jelly and his arm ached from scooping so much ice cream. Robin was doing no better on the till, her smile growing falser and her tone blunter until he was certain someone was going to throw their cone back in her face. Whoever had suggested she go into customer service couldn't have known her very well. Steve was so tired and distracted that he didn't even notice who was waiting in line until it was too late.

"Well, if it isn't King Steve. What happened to your crown, Harrington? You swap it for a sailor's hat?"

Steve closed his eyes and let out a long sigh into the ice cream before he straightened to face the smirking faces waiting for him on the other side of the counter.

"Hey Billy. Tommy, Carol," He greeted. "Enjoying your day at the

mall?"

"I am now," Billy replied. Just looking at him was enough to make Steve's face grow hot with shame. He hadn't forgotten how easily Billy had beaten him that night.

"Aren't you going to ask us what we want?" Carol asked. She was leaning on Tommy's shoulder.

"What do you want?" Steve echoed.

"I'll take a... uh..." Tommy took his sweet time deciding, playing it up for Carol and Billy. "How about a choc chip?"

Steve reached down to scoop it up for him. He'd be in his right mind to throw it in his stupid face.

"Actually!" Tommy said when Steve straightened with his cone. "I've changed my mind. Can I get pecan?"

Steve exhaled through his nose and tossed the cone into the bin before thrusting his scoop into the pecan tub. When he handed it over, Carol shook his shoulder. "Tommy, aren't you *allergic* to pecan?"

"Oh right, yeah. I can't believe I forgot that!" Tommy reached out to hand the cone back but Steve couldn't bring himself to take it. Tommy waved it in his face. "Come on, man. I'm allergic. You don't want me to make a complaint, do you?"

He knew it was stupid, he knew it was his pride getting the better of him, but Steve could not reach up to take that cone back. Tommy's eyes narrowed. He looked like he was gearing up for an outburst when Billy interrupted, reaching over to take the cone from Tommy.

"I'm sick of this place. A hick town with a mall is still just a hick town."

Tommy and Carol gave Steve one last condescending sneer before disappearing into the crowd that had accumulated behind them during Tommy's time-wasting charade. Billy didn't seem to be in any hurry.



"This is heart-breaking, Harrington. Just heart-breaking. Daddy must really have no faith in you if *this* is the best he could do." He took a bite of Tommy's cone, before winking at Steve. "Thanks for the ice cream."

Steve was so furious he couldn't do anything more than stare after Billy, even after he'd disappeared into the crowd. Robin was watching him, and it was all he could manage to mumble something about getting another ice cream tub to her before disappearing into the backroom. It was cold in the back, the air chilled by the two industrial freezers used to store the ice cream, but there was a place to sit and it was quiet and completely devoid of customers. Steve could've spent the rest of his day sat freezing to death if it meant he didn't have to scoop another cone or talk to another ex-classmate. *It wasn't fair*. He knew how that sounded: like he was some rich brat mad as his dad for not getting him a better job. But he'd never asked his father for a job. He'd never dare. Instead he'd tried his damned *best* to find a good job, and this was the only place that would take him. He'd never been a great student, but it wasn't like he'd flunked high school. He was on sports teams, he was popular, well-liked, and he was *better* than this. Even Hopper wasn't willing to help him, and he knew what Steve was really capable of.

"It's not fair."

Carol and Tommy had more respectable jobs than he did, and Billy would never degrade himself like this. He could barely look anyone in the eye when he served them. *And this stupid uniform doesn't help*. Steve pulled his hat off and shook out his hair, before pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes and letting out a long disgruntled sigh.

A scuffling sound in the corner of the room made him look up.

It had come from behind the freezer. Steve pulled a face. *Rats*. He got up and grabbed a broom from behind the door before approaching the freezer. They'd told their manager about the rats a dozen times at least but nothing had been done. Robin had almost quit a few days back when one ran out across her feet whilst she was stooping to pick up a tub of vanilla.

"Come here, you little bastard," Steve murmured, brandishing the broom like a weapon. It could be a blessing in disguise: he wanted nothing more than to beat something to death. He edged towards the freezer. It was gigantic, pressed against the wall so tight that he was surprised anything could fit behind it. He squinted down into the black space where the freezer met the wall, and when something in the darkness moved he thrust the handle-end of the broom down like a spear. He felt something *squish* beneath the wood and, disgusted, jerked backwards, dragging the broom with him. When the end of the handle came out, something else came splattering out onto the floor with it.

"What the hell..." Steve stared down at the purplish stain and a ball of slimy ribbons. It looked like rotten fruit. All of his pent-up aggression suddenly dissipated, and tentatively he reached out with the broom and nudged gingerly at the wet mass. It squelched and a worm fell loose, wriggling on the ground. Steve cringed and took a step back.

"Steve!" It was Robin. She was at the door, her face flushed and her hat askew. "Did you forget the mayor's coming today? Quit crying and come help me." When she caught sight of the worms he thought she was going to vomit or walk out and never come back. Instead she cast an uncertain glance back towards the tills before closing the door. "Please tell me that was in the freezer so we can shut this place down and go home?"

They both looked at the closed freezer door. He held the broom up. "Well... Let's open the door and find out."

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Starcourt Mall was heaving with people. Hopper hadn't even realized there *were* this many people in Hawkins. It wouldn't have been his choice to come here today but the mayor was making some kind of announcement and it was, apparently, of the utmost importance that police be present to ensure he was safe.

"The man must have a very high opinion of himself if he thinks anyone would risk jail to hurt him," Hopper had said when he found out. But looking at the crowd that had turned out for him... well, he might have to admit he was wrong for once. The crowd was so big

he'd sent Powell and Callahan off to make sure all corners of the food court were being watched, but he'd already seen both of them queuing at Scoops Ahoy. *Steve'll love that.* Hopper had considered going to say hello but he knew that'd be a bad idea. Anything less than a job offer was sure to piss the kid off even more. No, instead he was just going to stand there, in the middle of a sweltering hot, crowded food court, and suffer through Mayor Kline's speech. A stage had been set up in the centre of the court, and most of the chairs and tables had been moved aside to make room for people to stand and watch. They'd even bothered to hang a banner and set up a microphone, although as it turned out Kline didn't even need it. As soon as the mayor stepped onstage, the bustling food court fell quiet, before a sudden, impassioned applause made Hopper look around in confusion. *Have I left my home planet?* To say he hadn't been fully engaged with local politics during his lifetime was an understatement, but how he'd managed to miss the scores of Kline devotees that had seemingly been living amongst them the whole time was a real feat. Kline was gracious about it, smiling warmly and raising his hands in both thanks and to quiet everyone down. Just as commanded, the crowd fell silent.

"Thank you! Thank you all so much for coming out today. Is everybody enjoying our brand new mall?" He grinned as the applause returned, but this time it died down on its own, "It's a wonderful thing, isn't it? A real marvel! I cannot tell you all how proud I am that Hawkins is finally being recognised as the powerhouse it truly is. Of course, I don't have to tell you all that. I'm sure you all love this town as much as I do."

Hopper raised his eyebrows at the *whoops* of agreement.

"Now I know it's a hot day today and I'm sure you'd all rather be outside kicking back with a cold one or relaxing at the pool, so I'll keep this short. This mall is only the *beginning* of Hawkins' rise to the top. My team and I have—...Oh, is everything alright over there?"

Hopper had heard it too, a sudden retching. Some poor kid had eaten too much ice cream and was vomiting all over the floor. He had to be ushered out quickly before the mayor resumed.

"As I was saying, my team and I have been working very hard to

make this town the best that it could be. We know you've been calling out for years and now we've finally got a response. We're starting to really get somewhere. I have the honour of announcing phase two of Hawkins' expansion: a brand new technology centre, right here in the mall!"

The cheers drowned out Kline as he listed what that meant - computers, mobile phones, all the big names in technology right here in Hawkins - but Hopper was too dumbstruck to really listen. He didn't remember moving, but all of a sudden he was behind the stage.

"A new *technology centre*?" He asked, when Kline had finally finished and left the stage. "*That's* what Hawkins needs?"

The mayor gave him an incredulous look. "I don't remember it being the job of the police chief to give advice on business investments."

"No, it's my job to give advice on police investments. I thought the town's budget was too low for anything more."

"The budget is too low for unnecessary expenditures, Jim." The mayor rubbed his hands together, as if wiping them clean of Hopper and the police force. "We don't need more officers. The worst thing to happen in this town is already over. It's time for us to grow. This is the future."

"That's not—"

But the mayor had already moved on, surrounded by his team and his adoring supporters, leaving Hopper alone in the emptying food court. He gave the spot where the kid had been sick a wide berth, heading to where Powell and Callahan were stood talking about the mayor's speech.

"I can't wait... Man, I could spend my whole life in this mall." Callahan was saying. "Have you been up to Zales yet?"

"Zales?" Powell cast him a strange look. "What do I look like, your wife?"

"Hey," Hopper interrupted. Powell must have seen the look on his face.

"You okay, chief?"

"Outstanding."

Callahan must not have seen the look on his face.

"You looking forward to phase two, chief?" Callahan's stupid grin only faded when Powell fixed him with a pointed stare. Callahan spluttered, "I mean... It's good for culture and all that."

"Yeah?" Hopper asked. "Well I've had about as much culture as I can stomach. Let's go."

Most of the people who had gathered for the mayor's speech stayed to shop or eat at the mall, but a good number filtered out with the police. Hopper found himself struggling to wrap his head around why someone would drive all the way out to the mall just to listen to Kline's bullshit. Callahan and Powell walked ahead of him, heading straight across to the car. It was embarrassing sharing a ride, but until his car was fixed he didn't have much of a choice. He couldn't even get away with complaining about it - it was best not to invite any comments or questions about what he was doing when his state-assigned vehicle died.

The parking lot was busy, and Hopper had to pause to let a few cars pass him by before he could get to where they were parked. He watched familiar faces pass by through the glass, one after the other. If he didn't recognise faces he recognised their hair, or their posture, or their profile, or their car registration. Some looked back at him with a smile, others stared straight ahead as they drove by, and a few gave him nervous glances, guilt evident on their faces. It didn't matter to him. No one in Hawkins had ever committed a crime worse than the people at the National Laboratory, and that was gone now. They were all gone. The line of cars passed by, filled with people he had known almost his whole life, and all he could think of were the toys he used watch Sara play with. Wooden cars that clacked when they hit each other, each one painted some garish colour or other, but all of them still somehow the same. Identical toy cars with identical passengers, in a toy town, when the only person with any real control was a giant child. Hopper pinched his nose and breathed out a long sigh. When he opened his eyes he almost didn't notice it

when it passed. A looming white thing at the end of the line. Not a toy car, a ghost.

Hopper had seen that van before.

The white van slid by, so smooth and silent and so fucking *smug*, through the parking lot towards an area of the mall Hopper hadn't noticed before. It was unfinished, probably nothing more than a building site, but all that could be seen from the outside were walls of white tarpaulin. The van turned to pull up nearby, and as it did he squinted, looking for the writing on the side. He was looking for the blue text, the 'Hawkins: Power and Light', and as it turned into view he saw...

'Trusty Timmy's Tiles and Taps'

Hopper rolled his eyes and sighed. *God, maybe I'm getting sick too.* When he got to the car Callahan and Powell were sat waiting. He slid uncomfortably into the back seat. Powell turned to face him from the wheel.

"Ready to go, chief?"

"Let's get back to the station."

They were driving back into town when the radio crackled into life, cutting Callahan's monologue about the cultural significance of *Star Wars* mercifully short.

"Chief?"

Hopper leaned forwards. "I'm here, Flo."

"You've been ignoring your radio," Flo's voice was extra harsh through the radio. Powell and Callahan snickered. "Joyce Byers called for you. She said she'll pick the kids up from the pool later."

Hopper cleared his throat. "...Alright."

"We also had a call from Christine at Hal's, she said your car's ready —"

"—Oh, thank God—"

"—And finally, we had a call from a Mr Steve Harrington." Flo pronounced the name as if she'd never heard it before. "He said he wanted to talk to you *directly* about something. Wouldn't say a word to me about it."

"Harrington?" Powell glanced across at him. "Thought I'd see him at the mall but it was just that girl. What does he want?"

"Who knows?" Hopper shrugged, and then: "Thanks Flo."

The radio crackled, the static undisturbed. Hopper's eyes narrowed. "Flo?"

"Chief."

It was Powell. He was staring out at the road, his eyes wide. Hopper followed his gaze, first at the road and then up, distracted by something in the rear-view mirror. The road was long and straight, the view undisturbed for almost half a mile. That's how he saw it happen. The lights ahead were flickering, but it was those behind that caught his attention.

"Shut off the engine," Hopper commanded. "Pull over now."

Powell, thankfully, was quick about it. The car rolled to a stop right as the blackout reached them. The darkness swept up the road, going on up ahead for as far as they could see. They sat there in darkness for a moment until all at the once the lights came back on.

"That was weird." Callahan murmured from the passenger side. Their breathing sounded too loud in the car. The road was deserted but for them, and it was eerily quiet. Hopper was leaning forwards, hunched awkwardly between the two front seats, staring. He watched the flickering begin again in the far distance. This time there was no panic to stop, and they all just watched. The lights turned off and on, quick as a flash, one after the other back up the road, passing them by and heading back down towards the mall. When that had passed they stayed still and silent for a moment, waiting to see if the lights would turn off again, before finally Powell chanced the engine. The

car sprang to life as if nothing had happened.

*Christine was right. It only affects cars when the engine's on.*

"What in the Hell was that?" Powell asked. "Did you see that? It went back and forth. What was that?"

"Call and response..." Hopper said, almost to himself.

Callahan looked like he was preparing to say something but the radio crackling back to life made him jump. Hopper reached forwards for it.

"Flo? Can you hear me?"

The static continued. There was no answer. Powell let his hands drop heavily onto the wheel as he swore under his breath.

"Shh..." Hopper was straining to hear. Beneath the static a voice was struggling to be heard. Hopper tried again: "Flo?"

The sound got louder, and clearer. Callahan leaned away from the radio as if whatever was making it was hidden in there, trying to get out. The hairs on the back of Hopper's neck stood on end. It sounded like an animal, whining and growling. He switched it off.

"Hey—"

"Start driving," Hopper said. "Get us to the pool."

He recognised that noise, but that wasn't the sound that was echoing through his head the rest of the drive. Instead, all he could hear was Christine's voice.

*"An electrical surge. Near the mall. Outside the swimming pool."*

*Someone's calling out. And something's responding.*



### 3. Cold Water

#### Chapter Three

#### Cold Water

"You kids play safe, okay?" Joyce called from the car. Her smile lingered on each of them, and she turned to Eleven last. El smiled back. Joyce's smile ignited a warm feeling igniting in her chest; not the fire of rage or the cold burn of fear, but a warm hearth: home.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked, coming to stand beside her.

"Warm," She said, with a smile.

"Yeah, no shit—" Dustin breezed past them, shouldering his changing bag. "Show me that pool."

The others seemed to have the same idea; they were stood sweating in their normal clothes, their costumes sticking to their skin beneath as the sun beat down on their heads. The pool had only just opened and the long line of people waiting to get in was slowly getting shorter. Eleven hadn't been to the pool before. She understood the concept from how Hopper and Mike had explained it, and Joyce made sure she had everything she needed in her bag. The thought of the swimsuit made her heart race, but she couldn't really put her finger on why. It didn't feel very comfortable beneath her clothes, but she was glad she wouldn't have to find somewhere private to change. Looking around, she could see she wasn't the only one who wasn't comfortable. Will was shivering despite the heat; Max and Lucas kept glancing uncomfortably at each other; even Mike couldn't look her in the eye. Dustin was the only one who seemed to be in his element.

"Just you guys wait until I get in there. It'll be like He-Man." Dustin grinned, posing for them and growling like a lion. As the queue moved forwards and they got closer and closer to the pool, Dustin's ramblings continued, until no one was really listening. Will was too polite to make it as clear as Mike and Lucas and Max, so Dustin seemed to attach himself to the quieter boy. How much he appreciated Dustin's posturing was difficult to say, but Eleven swore

she saw him glance at her a few times for help. She wanted to, but was at a loss for what to say; fortunately for them both they suddenly found themselves at the front of the queue, and before they knew it they had entered the swimming pool.

The pool was outdoors, bigger than Eleven had dared to hope and sparkling under the sun. She'd never seen water so blue. Around the pool were pavestones of blushing pink stone, warmed by the sun so that when she took her shoes off she spent too long smiling down at her warm feet. Deck chairs were already being taken over by parents and other adults, but none of them were that interested in finding a seat.

"*Cannonball!*" Dustin screamed before flinging himself into the pool. He'd discarded his normal clothes in a pile on the floor, so he was only wearing a pair of swimming trunks – although he'd been running so fast Eleven hadn't really been able to tell. Once he surfaced he grinned up at everyone. A whistle blast pierced the air.

"Hey!" A young woman yelled from where she sat on a tall white chair. "No running!"

"Sorry!" Dustin called back.

Mike came up beside El, "What a jackass."

Eleven smiled at him. A few moments of silence passed before Mike cleared his throat and gestured at the water.

"Do you want to go in?"

She nodded and started to pull her shirt off. Mike turned away from her quickly and started to unbutton his shirt. For some reason his hands were shaking. El's swimsuit was brand new. At first the idea was floated around that she could borrow an old one of Nancy's, but El was too tall for her old swimsuits and all Nancy had now were two-pieces. Hopper had to take her to the mall to buy one. He'd stood outside the changing rooms, tapping his foot and clearing his throat while she pulled the awkward material over her head, and he'd taken her word for it when she told him which ones fit and which didn't. They'd settled on a navy blue swimsuit, and when Eleven had taken

her normal clothes off and turned to face the others, she saw that Mike's swimming trunks were the same colour. They looked at each for a few moments, before Mike finally said, "Do you want me to go in first?"

El nodded and stood by the pool as Mike lowered himself into the turquoise blue water. It was busy, and there were all kinds of people around, sitting on the deckchairs and bobbing up and down in the pool. Dustin had done a good job of clearing a small space for them in the pool. As Mike helped El down into the water, Dustin swam over to them and shook his hair out like a dog.

"Ew, gross!" Mike cringed away from him. Dustin grinned at them, his wet curls sticking to his face. Max jumped in next, and then Lucas, until it was Will left alone. He was standing with his arms at his sides, his hands twitching nervously as he looked down at them all. No one noticed him at first, except for El.

"Come on," She said, and he jumped a little, as if he hadn't even noticed her watching him, and then he smiled.

"Get in here, Will!" Dustin yelled. "I feel like Brian!"

"Does that make me Allison?" Max asked.

"You're definitely Claire, look at your hair!" Lucas said, giving one of the ginger strands a gentle tug. She batted his hand away with faux anger. El looked at Mike, and before she could ask he knew from her expression what she was going to say.

"They're talking about the Breakfast Club," He said. "Dustin meant... I don't know what he meant."

Mike's face suddenly went pink and he looked up at Will, "Come on, Will. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine," Will said with a quick smile, and he climbed in. El had been told a lot of things about the pool, and when she looked around she could see it all playing out in real life. Kids splashed and played; moms slipped sunglasses on and relaxed by the poolside with books or friends; dads bounced up and down in the water, hoisting toddlers

on their shoulders and tossing them into the water where they shrieked with equal parts glee and terror. Everywhere, people were having fun. Then she looked around at her own group of friends and it seemed like they were in a different world. Lucas and Max were treading water a little further away from the rest of them, but they didn't seem to be talking to or even looking at each other. Mike kept glancing at El, as if he was about to say something, but every time she looked at him he turned quickly away. Will seemed distracted, and Dustin was doing his best to liven everybody up.

"Come on, guys!" He shouted. "Quit acting weird."

"No one's acting weird," Lucas said defensively.

"Yeah right. I know what's going on," Dustin said, and wiggled his eyebrows.

Lucas shook his head. "Shut up, man."

El was a little further back from Dustin and Lucas than everyone else, but somehow she had a better view of what was going on than the rest of them did. Lucas was acting like he didn't care, like it was all a joke, but she could tell he was getting annoyed. Meanwhile, Dustin was so focused on making it into an even bigger joke that he either couldn't see that Lucas was genuinely annoyed, or was refusing to. Either way, what he did next was completely misjudged.

Dustin swept his arms up under the water and propelled a massive splash of water over Lucas. Max covered her face as it hit her too, drenching her hair, but it was Lucas who bore the brunt of it. When the water settled, he stood totally still, and no one could mistake his anger.

"Dude!" He cried. "What the fuck?"

"Come on man—" Dustin started, but Lucas interrupted.

"Why can't you just stop acting like such a jerk? Seriously! Just get away from me." Lucas turned and splashed away.

"Fine!" Dustin yelled, his voice breaking. "Maybe I will!"

He looked around at the rest of them. El could see the look in his eye as he searched their faces for some hint of solidarity, for someone to shake their head and say everything was fine and not to worry, but the moment drew out a bit too long and no one said anything. Max turned to join Lucas as he climbed out of the pool. Dustin's face hardened. Without saying another word, he turned and made his way out of the pool, on the opposite side to Max and Lucas.

"Guys?" Will called.

"Come on!" Mike added, looking from one side of the pool to the other. "This is so stupid." He said to El, but something else had caught her attention. It wasn't something she could see, not exactly. Perhaps something out of the corner of her eye, the faintest flicker of a shadow running past the corner of her vision. El turned her head, trying to follow it.

The pool was fenced in on all sides by a tall, powder-blue wooden wall, but behind her a maintenance gate opened directly out into the road. It was closed, but since it was made from widely-spaced iron railings El could see right through to the road stretching away beyond. It was the middle of the day, there was no reason for the streetlights to be on. It was on odd detail, and one she wouldn't have even noticed if it weren't for the flickering. The lights closest to the pool were slowly turning on and off, and despite the distance she felt like she could hear the electric hum and buzz as they glowed and died and glowed and died. There was another movement in her peripheral vision and she turned just in time to see the tall lights positioned around the pool flicker to life.

"El?" It was Mike. He was watching her watching the lights. "What is it?"

Eleven reached up to touch her chest. "Cold."

The water was warm, the sunlight was almost unbearably hot, and yet there was something icy creeping its way up El's legs, up and up until it soaked through her swimsuit and into her chest. Mike looked around.

"Hey guys!" He shouted over to Lucas and Max. "Something's wrong."

Dustin?"

Dustin couldn't hear, he was too busy talking the ear off the lifeguard, but other people were starting to take notice too. Mothers sat up from their chairs, fathers pulled their children closer. All the while, El was getting colder and colder, her eyes never leaving the lights above her as they flickered on and off and on and off, over and over and faster and faster.

"Hey!" She heard Mike say. "Where's Will?"

"Mike..." El said. It was so cold. "There's something beneath us."

Mike looked under the water, just as a shrill whistle pierced the air. The lifeguard pushed Dustin aside and leapt into the water, and Mike and El saw at once where she was swimming to.

Will was at the bottom of the pool.

The lifeguard was in the water and moving towards him as quickly as she could, but there were so many people in her way and within moments all of them had begun to panic. Mike and Eleven could see, and so could Lucas and Max.

"Get out of the way!" Max screamed. "Move!"

"Dustin!" Lucas yelled, but Dustin was stood frozen in place, staring down at his friend under the water.

Mike started to splash his way over, but he got swept up in the tide of people trying to get out. Eleven could see it all happening: Mike falling back, stumbling, his head going under the water. The lifeguard shoving fruitlessly against people, trying desperately to get to Will. She could see it all.

"No!" Eleven shrieked, and she raised her hands. A wave pushed back against the people shoving into Mike, and some of them tripped and fell backwards at the force of her powers.

And then something pushed back. Eleven gasped.

Black. Cold and black. She couldn't see but she knew it – she knew it

better than she knew this world. The Upside Down. She opened her mouth in horror, and she raised her arms to fight against it, but somehow it had her again. She was back there, trapped in the cold dark water.

Then warm hands grabbed her and hauled her up, and she choked and gasped for air. She didn't remember falling backwards. She had no idea how long she'd been under the water.

"El?" Mike shook her. "Eleven? Are you okay?"

Eleven coughed again but she managed a nod. "Where's Will?"

Mike turned and she looked past his shoulder to see that the pool was almost empty, and the lifeguard was crouching beside Will at the poolside. He was lying on the ground, but he was awake. She could see him shaking, and his terrified eyes were fixed on her. She knew then that he had seen it too. Her eyes flickered to where Will had been in the water, where the black circle of the grate was the only noticeable thing in the white tiled floor. That dark hole threatened to pull her right in, just like it had with Will.

Somewhere, somehow, the Upside Down was there.

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It was dark when Steve finally rolled up outside Dustin's house. He shut off the engine and sat for a few minutes in the muggy darkness, thinking, then he reached for the box on the seat next to him and got out. His arms ached from the shift at Scoops Ahoy but the box wasn't too heavy, although there was something unsettling about the way the weight inside seemed to shift on its own. Tucking the box under one arm, he reached the front door and raised his free hand to knock, but right before he could make contact a sharp whisper distracted him.

"Steve!" It was Dustin, peering out from the garage. "Over here!"

Steve rolled his eyes and stepped carefully around the flowerbeds to reach him, catching his foot on some gaudy, trailing pink flower as he did. As soon as he'd tripped his way over to Dustin, he held up the box.

"What's that?" Dustin asked.

"It's what I wanted to show you." Steve replied. "Why are you in the garage?"

"No reason." Dustin said, too quickly. Steve looked behind him to see his bike leaning against the wall. He didn't need to ask Dustin any more questions, a withering look was all it took for him to spill the beans. "I'm not doing anything!"

"Is that—" Steve tried to see over Dustin's shoulder, "Is that a tool box?"

"No! No it's not a—" Dustin caught sight of Steve's face and quickly change tact. "Alright, it's a tool box."

"Why is there a *tool box* on the back of your bike?"

Dustin shrugged, "I was just moving some things around. Cleaning, you know?"

"Cleaning?" Steve repeated. "You were cleaning your garage. At night. For your mom? That's sweet of you."

Dustin grinned that silly hopeful grin of his, "Yeah, I know."

Steve rolled his eyes again. "I was being sarcastic, man. Now take this box off me, it's grossing me out."

"Okay, okay," Dustin literally leapt at the chance to get away from the conversation, reaching quickly for the box. Before he could grab it Steve held it up too high for him to reach, the strange movements going on inside the box changing his mind.

"Wait, wait. Can I put it down somewhere?" He nodded to an empty table in the centre of the garage. "Over there?"

"Sure," Dustin backed up to let Steve past, and casually shifted the tool box off of the bike as he did. Steve pretended not to notice. "Hey, have you spoken to Hopper at all?"

"That's Chief Hopper to you," Steve said. "And no."



"What about Nancy?"

Steve paused. He hadn't expected to hear her name. "No."

"So you haven't heard about what happened at the pool?" Dustin rushed over to the table, "Oh my God it was insane, dude."

Steve stood and listened to Dustin's breathless retelling of the day's events, from his argument with Lucas to his flirtatious banter with the lifeguard ("Her name's Heather and she is totally into me. Real sexual electricity.") and finally to what happened with the lights.

"I've heard about that, with the lights," Steve said. "Cars have been cutting out too."

"That's not the only thing. Will, he..." Dustin's explanation so far had been breathless and excited, but now he seemed to sober up. "I don't know what happened but he was under the water and Heather, the lifeguard, had to jump in and rescue him. He was okay! He was fine but..."

"Jesus." Steve muttered. "Are you sure he's okay? Is Joyce okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm pretty sure everything's okay." Dustin shook his head. "Hopper closed the pool down. I don't know what we're going to do about the heat now."

For a moment Steve couldn't believe Dustin's priorities about an accident that almost got his friend killed, and then he realized that he couldn't believe it because it wasn't believable.

"Are you okay?" He asked. Dustin cleared his throat and pushed his shoulders back.

"Yeah, man."

"Seriously, I'm asking." Steve shifted his weight and leaned on the table, so he was eye-level with the kid. "That's pretty rough, seeing your friend like that. Especially after everything that's happened."

"Yeah." Dustin admitted. "I mean... yeah."

There was a long pause, before Steve slid the box across the table. "So, want to take a look?"

Dustin cracked a smile and reached for the box quickly, but right before he lifted the lid he gave Steve a suspicious look.

"Go on, open it," Steve said impatiently, and then as Dustin gripped the lid he added: "Slowly!"

It was the smell that hit them first. Steve hadn't remembered it smelling that bad at the mall. It was like rotten fruit or rotten meat – like something he might find in the freezer if the power had been out for a long time – but beneath that sickly sweetness there was something sharper, metallic, like iron. Dustin was closer to the box and got the worst of it, and he reared backwards.

"Holy shit!" He cried, gagging. "What is that?"

"That's what I thought you'd know!" Steve said, between coughs. As soon as they'd found the worms behind the freezer, he and Robin had managed to wrangle them into one of the empty ice-cream tubs. They hadn't found any in the freezer, thank God, but Robin had left a note for their manager that they should close the place down for a few days and get somebody in to check the food. Steve had thrown the note away as soon as Robin had turned her back. The worms didn't look like anything he'd ever seen before, and he had a bad feeling that they were from the same place all those "demodog" things had come from. He knew the kids would know more about it than he did. As soon as he'd put in the call for Hopper he'd called at Dustin's and left him a note when he realized he wasn't there. Dustin insisted on using secret notes so his mom didn't know, as if she'd freak out if she ever saw him hanging out with Steve Harrington. Steve had gone along with it. He'd managed to screw up a few things in his life... most things, actually, but so far he hadn't screwed up this. He'd talk to Dustin first about the worms, then, he promised himself, he would tell the manager that they needed to close. He came over to look into the box and found quite a different sight than what he'd remembered. At the mall the worms had been a dark, brownish-red, and were very thin and didn't move around much. Now, not only had the smell intensified, but the worms looked like they'd melted together. Now they were a pale, fleshy reddish-pink colour, like an organ, and they

were bigger and livelier.

"Oh God!" Steve shoved the lid back on and stepped back to join Dustin, and both of them looked at the box in horror, neither wanting to be the first to go back.

"What is that? Did you kill a cat and take its intestines or something?" Dustin said, still sputtering.

"No, man, it's... It *was* a bunch of worms. I found them at the mall behind the freezer. I thought you'd know what they were!"

Dustin crept forwards, slowly, and took a tentative peek into the box. "Worms?" He said distrustfully.

"Yeah. They were dark red. They looked like... they looked kinda like a mophead, you know?"

"They don't look like that anymore."

"No." Steve came to join him at the table. "Is that normal?"

"No."

"Do you know anything else about worms?" Steve asked. Dustin gave him a weird look.

"I'm not a worm expert, Steve. I mean I know a little but... I don't know about this."

"Great... Well they're living behind the freezer in Scoops Ahoy so at least we know they must like the cold." Steve looked across at him. "Do you think they're like that thing you found? The... uh..."

"Dart." Dustin finished. "He wasn't a worm."

"I know that." They both stared down at the pink worms. "I think we should tell the others. Do you still have those radio things?"

Dustin performed the most dramatic eye-roll Steve had ever seen. "Walkie-talkies."

"Walkie-talkie, whatever. Do you kids still use them? We can ask them right now what these things are." Steve glanced down at the box and then took a step back from the table, ready for action. "I mean, you're all good at science and stuff, right?" Dustin didn't move. Steve clicked his fingers. "Hey! Hello?"

"Don't you think it's a bad time? I mean... with everything that happened today," Dustin said.

"Yeah, but this could be really important." When Dustin didn't seem convinced, Steve went on: "Look, I can do it if you're worried about what they'll think. Then they'll know it's serious. Just pass me the radio... walkie-talkie."

Dustin sighed heavily and turned around, taking lethargic footsteps towards the back of the garage where he began to rifle through a cardboard box. He pulled out two walkie-talkies and brought them back over. As soon as Steve reached for one of them, Dustin cracked.

"Okay, here's the thing. We still have the walkie-talkies but they're not working great and the guys can't always hear me. And everyone's super busy, you know, and we don't really have to use them anymore."

"Well, so what? We can still try."

"It's just a waste of time. Why don't you tell Hopper?"

"*Chief* Hopper," Steve corrected. "I'm going to."

"So why don't we just wait to see what he says?" Dustin asked. "I don't think the others are going to know what's going on."

There was a long pause. Steve narrowed his eyes. "Alright, spill it."

"What?"

"You're acting weird."

"No, I'm not!" Dustin protested.

"I swear to God I will throw that box over your head if you don't tell

me the truth. *Spill it.*"

Dustin groaned and dropped the walkie-talkies onto the table. It wasn't hard for Steve to see that Dustin did *not* want to tell him the truth, and part of him felt bad for forcing him to, but the sight of that pulsing pink mass in the box was enough to make him hold his tongue. Finally, Dustin spoke.

"I've already tried to radio them today. And on other days. I've tried a lot, but they don't reply." Dustin shrugged, not looking Steve in the eye. "Sometimes the radios aren't working properly but not always. They're all busy now. Will still uses his but..."

It wasn't hard for Steve to piece together what Dustin was trying so hard not to say. He reached out and placed a hand on Dustin's shoulder. "Okay, so... You're at that weird age where kids start getting girlfriends and you start... you know..."

"Ew, okay. I get it!" Dustin said, shrugging off Steve's hand.

"No, I was going to say you guys start to drift apart. It's natural. But it gets better. You'll get there."

"Steve, seriously. Stop."

"Alright! Just trying to help." Steve picked up one of the radios. He studied it for a while, and then finally he said. "Listen, do you mind if I take one of these?"

Dustin looked up at him, the scepticism clear on his face. "Uh... Why?"

"You know, so I can let you know if anything happens." It was a lie, but Steve could hardly tell him the truth: that it was just to make Dustin feel better. "I can show this box to Hopper tomorrow and I'll let you know what he says."

"Sure. Yeah, okay," Dustin grinned, growing more excited about the idea. "Why don't you take another walkie-talkie and see if Chief Hopper wants it. That way we can all stay in contact: like a united force against the Upside Down!"

"Right..." Steve began, but that dumb grin on Dustin's face, and the way he'd just tried his best not to sound pitiful while describing his friends ignoring him, stopped him from saying no. *Don't screw this up, Steve*, he reminded himself. So instead, he said: "Sure, I'll take him one."

Steve picked up the second walkie-talkie. He considered prying into what Dustin had said about them not always working, but he knew that could have just been Dustin's way of justifying the others ignoring him. He also considered making him explain the tool box, but again he didn't want to upset him. Afterwards, when he was driving home, he started to wonder if that was the right decision.

"I'll ask him tomorrow," He said to himself. He looked down at the box, sitting beside the two walkie-talkies. "After I ask Hopper about that."

## 4. Mayor Kline

### Chapter Four

#### Mayor Kline

It was a cool, yellow morning. Hopper sat on the front porch and watched the white wisps of cloud drift across the horizon. It was peaceful, not unlike the mornings he'd spent out by the water in his old place. It had been Joyce's idea to move closer to the town; now that he had Jane to take care of they needed more space and the cabin had too many bad memories wrapped up in it – not that things had gotten a lot better since.

He'd closed the pool as soon as he got there. The manager hadn't been too pleased about losing the business but the lifeguard who'd saved Will backed him up, which was a pleasant surprise. Joyce, in her single-minded rush to get to Will, had all but shoved the poor girl over. Not that Hopper blamed her.

"Why is this *still* happening, Hop?" She had hissed, her eyes wide and shining with tears. "It's not fair – he's just a *boy*."

Hopper had looked across at her car, where Will was sat staring out of the window. He hadn't known what to say to her. She was right: it wasn't fair, on either of them. He knew how it felt to feel helpless to protect your kid.

A flock of birds passed overhead, and Hop exhaled through his nose. Jane would still be asleep, otherwise Hopper would go and question her again about what had happened. Trying to get answers out of her was near impossible: Hopper had never been a natural at the whole 'good cop' routine, but trying to go 'bad cop' and push her was just going to make her push back, and he knew from experience how that would go. Jane hadn't said a word about what happened at the pool, but where his questioning tactics had failed his instincts hadn't. Something had happened, and whatever it was had something to do with the lights, and the cars, and maybe the mall. What any of that had to do with the pool was another story, and something he'd get to the bottom of today if he could.

Right on cue, a police car swung into his driveway, which reminded him of another task on his to-do list.

"Hey, can we swing by Hal's on the way?" Hopper asked as he climbed into the passenger seat. "I need to get my car."

"Ah, sorry. No can do, Chief," Callahan replied. "The Mayor's at the station."

Hopper looked across at him. "What?"

"Mayor Kline. He's at the station."

Hopper gave him a look as if to say *'That's clearly not what I meant by "what"'* before trying a different question: "Why?"

Callahan shrugged. "No idea, but he wants to speak to you."

"So, what?" Hopper slapped his hands down on the dash. "Are you my chaperone?"

Callahan rolled his eyes. "Come on, Chief. You know it's not like that. I mean... whatever it is that Kline has to say, it seems kind of important."

Hopper forced back a curse and looked out of the window, drumming an angry rhythm on the dash. Callahan, in a show of uncharacteristic perceptiveness, chose to remain silent for the rest of the journey. When they pulled into the station, Hopper was met by half-a-dozen unfamiliar cars taking up most of the spaces.

"How many idiots has he brought with him?" He asked as Callahan managed to squeeze into one of the few remaining parking bays. Callahan just shrugged, but it didn't take Hopper long to find out the answer. He felt the attention before he saw it; the moment he set foot in the station the low chatter was replaced by total silence and he could feel the tension in the air. When he rounded the corner he was greeted first by Flo, who gave him a grim look as she motioned for his hat and jacket. Hopper didn't have to ask why she wanted to take them since she never usually did – it was very clear she'd had enough of what was going on behind her.



"Jim!" Kline announced as soon as he saw him, striding forwards to greet him. He was shadowed by two men; Hopper recognised one of them as Ron Harrington, Steve's dad. Why the Hell Ron Harrington was there was as much a mystery as the identity of the second man. A few other men lingered around, awkwardly positioned around the desks and chairs as the rest of the police force looked on in silence. Hopper took one look at Kline's outstretched hand and gestured behind him.

"Let's talk in my office."

"No, no, that won't be necessary." Kline abandoned the attempted handshake and instead clapped a hand onto Hopper's shoulder. "I have a small announcement to make."

Despite the Mayor's gleaming smile and tight grip on his shoulder, Hopper's gaze instead went to Harrington. He had never had the pleasure of a proper conversation with the man. The fact that he was here now, in person and with the Mayor of all people, filled him with nothing but dread.

"Hello! Hello, everybody!" Mayor Kline said, unnecessarily. All eyes were already on him. "Firstly, I want to thank you all for your great service. Hawkins will forever be in the debt of outstanding officers like yourselves."

"Jesus..." Hopper said under his breath. He didn't like where this was going.

"Now, I'm sure you are already aware of the unfortunate event at the pool just the other day. Chief Hopper was, of course, one of the first respondents on the scene and again we thank you for your service." Mayor Kline took a moment to smile widely at Hopper, before he carried on: "I have spoken with the onsite team and after a very careful and very detailed investigation we have decided to reopen the pool."

"What?" Hopper asked, unable to hold his tongue. "You've reopened... Who did the investigation? When?"

"Well, Chief, you've interrupted me mid-flow!" Kline said with a

hearty laugh. "That was my second point, and the reason why these wonderful fellows are here with me today."

When Kline gestured at Harrington and the other man, neither reacted strongly. There was only the slightest incline of Harrington's head, as if he thought it was beneath him to acknowledge anybody in the room. Even, perhaps, the Mayor himself.

"I took into consideration what you said to me at Starcourt Mall, Chief." Kline continued. "You voiced your *understandable* concern about the ability of the Hawkins Police department to properly govern and protect this town as it continues to expand and grow. It's a very valid concern and I'm glad you brought it to my attention. My solution is this: together with Mr Harrington here and my good friend Mr Stone, we are bringing in a dedicated security team for Starcourt Mall. I believe this will help to alleviate the strain on the resources of Hawkins Police, and will make it possible for you all to do your jobs at the highest possible level."

The words were bouncing around Hopper's head faster than he could think, but he had to say something. "Private security? What does that have to do with the pool?"

"Oh, well, I saw a place where their skills could be used so I took the liberty of taking the burden off of you." Kline smiled widely. "I thought after your fantastic work there the other day you could use a bit of a rest!"

"I really think we should talk in my office."

"Why?" Kline affable smile of confusion was enough to push Hopper over the edge."

"Because that's *police work* you're giving away. Meanwhile, what, we're sitting out here on the side-lines?"

"Hopper, please," Kline said, raising his hands in a calming gesture. "Let's not be dramatic."

Hopper could see it so clearly: the way it all looked. He was standing with his fists clenched, his voice raised, meanwhile Kline was calm

and diplomatic and *smug*. Hop's own team was going to side against him, especially if it meant less work. He could see it, but he couldn't stop it. All he could do was seethe in silence until Kline, Harrington and Stone decided to speak to him personally.

"Chief, I don't want you to feel like you're being undermined here—" The Mayor cut off at Hopper's barely contained spluttering of anger. The other two men didn't speak, but he swore he saw Harrington's eye twitch just a little. Kline tried again: "I do hope you'll come around to the idea."

"Or don't." Ron Harrington said. "It doesn't really matter what you think."

Hopper stared at him. "I'm sorry, what do you have to do with any of this?"

Harrington didn't reply, he only smiled. Mayor Kline was the one who answered: "Mr Harrington was crucial to securing investment in Starcourt Mall. He appealed to investors and company heads on the behalf of Hawkins to make it all possible, including the new expansion."

"Uh-huh, how about you?" Hopper directed this to the other man, Mr Stone. Again, it was Mayor Kline who answered.

"Mr Stone is a key figure behind phase two. Without him, in fact without either of these men, the technology centre wouldn't be possible."

"I suppose we have them to thank, then." Hopper deadpanned. "And how about the security? Who's dealing with that?"

"It's all in good hands, Chief Hopper, don't worry," Kline assured him. From behind them, Hopper heard the door to the station swing open. He turned to see Joyce coming around the corner, brown eyes widening at the sight of the Mayor and his stooges.

"If you'll excuse me, gentlemen," Hopper turned away from Kline and the others and went straight to Joyce. "Hey, is everything okay?"

"Fine, what's going on?" She asked in a lowered voice.

"They're reopening the pool," Hopper muttered back. Joyce immediately looked past him at Mayor Kline.

"What? You can't reopen the pool it's not safe!" She cried.

Mayor Kline's response was the smuggest look Hopper had ever seen, coupled with a level of patronization he didn't think was possible. "Good morning, sweetheart. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Yeah, there's something you can help me with," Joyce fumed. "You can start by telling me why you'd reopen the pool after my *son* almost drowned."

"I can see you're very emotional and I want you to know that I totally understand your concerns. I can assure you that the pool is entirely safe."

"Entirely safe?" Joyce repeated.

"I apologize for what happened to your son, but you have to understand that it was an accident. Now, if you'd like to discuss it further let me redirect you to my office. I'm sure my secretary—"

Hopper could see Joyce gearing up for an all-out attack so he decided to intervene before Kline had an excuse to press charges. There was no way Hop could go through with that – he'd quit before he arrested Joyce Byers on behalf of *Mayor Kline*. Laying a hand on Joyce's shoulder he pulled her out of the room and back outside. The sun was still low in the sky, in that irritating place where it hovered right above the horizon so no matter where you looked you had to squint or cover your eyes. No doubt he'd be taking calls about road accidents soon, there was always some unlucky son-of-a-bitch getting themselves into a collision on a day like this. That was the last thing the town needed after the recent breakdowns. The moment the door swung shut behind them and they were out of earshot of everybody inside, Joyce pulled her arm out of his grasp.

"I can't let you hit the Mayor, Joyce. You know that." Hopper began. Joyce gave him a dark look.

"You can't expect me to just stand back and let that *asshole* do that."

Joyce hissed, gesturing angrily at the station. "You know *that*."

"I do know that he's an asshole," Hopper agreed. "Listen, I'm going to fix this. Alright? I just can't have you getting in trouble with that guy. He's not worth the jailtime, trust me."

"This is serious, Hop. I know what happened to Will wasn't normal. Maybe it was the pool, maybe it was the lights... I don't know. But there has to be something going on."

Hopper exhaled through his nose, looking down at her steadily. He didn't disagree with her, but neither could he share her blind conviction. If they went storming back into the station yelling about monsters they'd be laughed out of the room, or worse. He pinched his nose. "I'll fix it. Just... please don't worry. You've been through enough."

"Don't patronize me."

"I'm no—..." Hopper cut himself off and took a moment to steady his breathing. "I'm sorry. I just want to keep you safe."

"I know," Joyce said. "But I have to keep my son safe. And you have to keep that little girl safe too."

"I have to keep everybody safe," Hopper said, tapping his badge and offering her a grim smile. Joyce, thankfully, returned it. He couldn't stand the thought of her being angry with him, not after everything. He cleared his throat. "What are you doing here?"

Joyce seemed momentarily stumped by the question, "What... Oh! Oh, well, to be honest I just wanted to check on what was happening with the pool, to see if you'd found anything."

"Well, if you believe Kline then there was nothing there."

"It should stay closed. The kids don't even miss it; they're at mine today, I was going to head to the mall to pick up some movies for them."

"Are you going there now?" Hopper asked.

"Yeah."

"Do you mind if I catch a lift?" He asked, his gaze wandering around the parking lot, lingering on every shining black car. "There's something I need to check out."

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Starcourt Mall was as busy as ever. Hopper had to wonder how bad things would have to get in Hawkins before the Mall would lose its dedicated consumer base. Joyce found a space not far from the building site where Hopper had seen the white van a few days before. As Joyce struggled to open the car door without hitting the car next to them, Hopper took a good long look at the white tarpaulin and high chain-link fences that obscured whatever was going on at the mall. He couldn't see any vans this time, but there was a more sophisticated gateway in place now, with a proper metal gate guarded by a proper private army.

"He wasn't kidding about hiring his own security," Hopper murmured through a cigarette as Joyce slammed the door shut behind her and came to join him. He nodded at the men patrolling the gate and Joyce squinted over at them.

"What is all of that?"

"Oh, you didn't hear? This is the future." Hopper pointed his cigarette at the decidedly-unfuturistic marquees. "Phase two: Rise of the machines."

"Stop," Joyce chastised. "Are you coming?"

Hopper took another look at the guards outside the tents. If that was external entrance, surely there was another way in inside too. "Sure." He said and followed her across the parking lot.

Once they were inside he started to think of the best way to split from Joyce – there was no way he'd put her at risk like that – but before he had a chance to come up with a polite way of saying *'Thanks for the lift, catch you later'* Joyce did it for him.

"I'm gonna go grab the movies or I'll be late back. Let me know if you

need a ride, okay? Is your car still at Hal's?"

*Shit.* He'd forgotten about the car again. "Uh... Yeah. Sure. Thanks, Joyce. See you later."

"See you," She said, and left him behind. *Huh.* He stood there on his own for a few moments before setting off in the direction he thought the entrance must be. If Joyce had known what he was planning to do then she hadn't let on. Hopper shoved his hands into his pockets and did his best to make it through the crowded food hall without knocking into anybody. Making himself as small and inconspicuous as possible served more than one purpose: Scoops Ahoy loomed large and unavoidable on the opposite side of the food hall, and the last thing he wanted was the kid showing up. He had almost made it through in one piece when a woman ran full-sprint into him, almost knocking him over. The woman went sprawling across the ground, shocking a gaggle of teenage girls sitting nearby. Some of them started to laugh nervously as the embarrassed woman scrambled to sit up. Hopper ducked down to help her, taking her arms and hauling her upright. She was very thin, and for a second he thought he might have really hurt her.

"Hey, are you alright?"

The woman was trying to stand up straight, but it was like her legs weren't strong enough to hold her. She was muttering something over and over about how she was fine, alternating with how she was sick and needed to get to the bathroom. When she got her balance back Hopper let her go. The woman's head rolled back and she looked up at him.

"Hey," Hopper said, grabbing her again. "Hey, you're bleeding."

The woman reached up with one hand and wiped away the blood trickling from her nose. "I know." She pulled away, her strength apparently rejuvenated, and before Hopper could stop her she took off again. He was about to go after her when a strong hand grabbed his arm.

"Hey!"

"Christ... Steve," Hopper tried to look over the kid's shoulder to see where the woman had gone but it was too late. "Listen, now's not a good time."

Steve was looking up at him, his Scoops Ahoy cap sitting slightly askew on his head. "Look, I have to talk to you about something—"

"Steve..." *Don't shout at the kid. Don't shout at the kid. It's not his fault his dad's a dick.* "Do you know where the inside entrance is to the new building site?"

"Uh... Yeah, it's down by Jazzercise." Steve pointed. "Listen, I really need—"

"Okay, I'll be right back. I just need to take care of something."

Before Steve had a chance to say anything else Hopper took off in the direction of his still outstretched finger. Hop didn't hear Steve's muttered "Son of a bitch", but he did notice the looks of alarm and suspicion from other mallgoers as his feet pounded across the shining tiled floor. *What are you doing, Jim? They're gonna think there's some kind of emergency.* Hopper slowed to a jog, his eyes scanning the storefronts for the bright rainbow sign for Jazzercise. The whole time he was sure he was going in the wrong direction if he was thinking of the external entrance, although it was easy to lose your sense of direction in a place like this. That, or the internal entrance really was on the other side of the mall, and the building site stretched much further than it appeared. *Had the Mayor said something about it going underground?* Hopper couldn't remember, and he was so absorbed in trying to that he almost missed the gawdy storefront he'd been looking for. Hopper skidded to a halt right in front of a pair of inconspicuous-looking double doors. He looked around for some kind of sign, or anything indicating an entrance, but there was nothing. Just these doors, and that ugly store. Hopper shrugged and took a quick glance around before approaching the doors and giving them a gentle push. Nothing. He tried again, this time gripping the handles and giving them a rough shake. The doors didn't budge, but Hopper felt the handle move beneath his hand and he quickly stepped back. A man in a dark blue uniform stuck his head out, eyeing Hopper suspiciously. Hop cleared his throat.



"Hey! Is this the way, uh, backstage?" Hopper asked, cracking a grin. "We had a call about some suspicious activity. Someone trying to get where they're not supposed to?"

The man pulled the door open a little more, revealing his uniform. Security. "I haven't heard anything about that, officer."

"Chief." Hopper corrected. "Well, we've had a call so it's our job to investigate."

"There's nothing back here, Chief. Anyone trying to get through would need a staff card," The security guard pointed at a small scanner Hopper hadn't noticed on the wall beside the doors. "Appreciate you coming out, but you'll need to speak to the head of security and he's not here right now. You can wait in the food hall."

With that, he closed the door. Hopper cursed under his breath. If the head of security was anything like that guy, there was no way he'd let Hopper through. Even worse, if he was caught lying about something like that he had no doubt that Kline and his suits would serve him with a lifetime ban from Starcourt Mall. Under normal circumstances, he would consider that a blessing. But now that he was here Hopper's bad feeling about the place was only getting worse, and he'd learned to trust his gut a long time ago. He had to get in, but how?

Then his eyes went to the scanner. "How the Hell am I gonna get a staff card?" He muttered, but already the idea was forming in his head.

Chief Hopper took a deep breath, adjusted his hat, and headed back towards the food court. If there was something hidden in the mall, Hopper had to find it. He'd broken into more dangerous places, and better guarded, but had he done worse to get there? He was still some hundred feet away when he glimpsed Steve, still standing where he'd left him. *Poor kid*. Steve looked lost, and angry. Hop couldn't really blame him for that. His bull-headed approach began to lose its lustre. A dozen images filled his head, of Steve's stolen card being discovered, and the kid taking the blame. What would his father think about that? What would the Mayor think? When they started asking questions about why Steve Harrington's card was in a restricted area, would Hopper be the one who had to arrest him?

Steve caught sight of him then, and the Chief had no choice but to keep walking towards him, his mind buzzing. When Steve reached him Hopper could hear him saying something about a radio, probably the same nonsense as before about having his own police radio so he could learn and help them in secret. Hopper didn't listen, instead he put his hand on his shoulder and pushed him away. "No. Pick up my car. If you want to help me, get my car."

Then Hopper turned and left Steve behind, before he could change his mind.

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"And he just asked you to pick up his car? His police wagon?" Robin's barrage of questions hadn't ended since Steve had asked her to drop him at Hal's Garage rather than home, as she usually did. He had responded with silence, mostly because they were questions he couldn't answer. "How is that even allowed? Surely they'll just take one look at you and throw you out."

"I don't know," Steve murmured. His mood had been slowly disintegrating all day, even before running into Hopper, and now all he wanted to do was get home. But Chief Hopper had asked him to do something, and like an idiot he was doing it. *It could get you somewhere*, he thought. *Or he could be taking advantage of you.* To his relief Robin finally decided to give up on the questions, instead turning her attention to an unfortunate stain on her uniform.

"I hate kids," She grimaced, sniffing at the pale orange mark across her sleeve. Some poor kid had thrown up right before the midday rush, and it had been Robin's job to go and clean it up. "I've seen more vomit working this job than I have the entire rest of my life."

"I know." Steve agreed, his attention divided between the suspicious smell coming off of the dried-up stain, and the lights of the garage coming up ahead of them. "Hey, thanks for the lift." He said after they pulled up. Robin had her window rolled down so she could talk to him, but she also seemed glad for the chance to stick her head out and suck in some fresh air.

"No problem, you want me to wait around just in case."

Steve considered it before shaking his head. "No, that's okay. If there's a problem I'll get them to call Hop."

"Man, I'm glad you said that," Robin said. "Because if I have to spend another second in these clothes I'm going to lose it."

Steve had to laugh. "Get home safe, alright."

"Sure thing, dad."

Steve stepped back and watched her drive away, before turning his attention to this isolated little garage on the outskirts of town. Hal's wasn't somewhere he was overly familiar with – he'd driven past a few times, but he'd never used them himself. Suddenly less confident about his decision to send Robin away, he cleared his throat and started up the driveway towards the building. It was a two-storey shack, with a workhouse at the side and a small office lit by bright, unfriendly light. Even outside he could see how cramped and messy the office was, and as he got closer he could see that the roller door into the workhouse was partially open, and a familiar boot was sticking out.

Steve swore under his breath as he took the final few steps up to the office and saw him standing inside.

"—fix it." Billy finished saying, just as Steve pushed the door open. Billy turned, and as soon as he saw him, he grinned. "Look who it is."

Steve looked past him at the girl behind the counter. She was the same age as him, but he didn't recognise her from school. She was pressing her lips together so tightly the skin had gone white, and even then he could see them trembling.

"What's going on here?" He asked. Billy lifted his arms in a shrug.

"Just making sure I'm getting the service I was promised." Billy said. He pointed past Steve out of the door, to where the flickering sign stood. "You don't call it 'Hal's' if the only person working on the cars is this—" He gestured at the girl. "It's not fair. It's not honest."

"How about you stop being such a dickhead, huh?" Steve said. Billy raised his hands and stepped away from the counter.

"You're getting me all wrong, Stevey-boy." Billy offered the girl a smile, something so kind and so charming and so venomously cruel that Steve felt a pang of sympathy for her. "I wasn't being rude, was I?" Billy asked her. "You understand that my car is important to me, and I just want to make sure it's being looked after. I didn't mean to upset you, baby." The girl swallowed but didn't say anything. Billy held her gaze until she looked away, and then he turned to look at Steve. "Guess I'll see you around."

Steve stepped aside to let Billy pass. He heard Billy give a loud, wet cough – probably on purpose - and he didn't move until he heard the door close behind him.

"Are you okay?" He asked the girl, and to his surprise she laughed and nodded.

"Yeah, yeah. Fine! Just, you know, the usual customer service stuff." She sniffed and smiled at him. Steve pretended not to notice how shiny her eyes were, or the redness in her cheeks.

"I get that," He tried for a carefree laugh but it came out a little choked. "I work at the mall."

"Ouch," The girl crossed her arms, clearly more than happy to joke rather than acknowledge what had happened with Billy. "Where?"

"You'll laugh." Steve promised her. "Scoops Ahoy!"

"The ice cream place? My uncle loves it there. He's supposed to be on a diet; he thinks I don't know but I take out the trash so I always see the wrappers." The girl grinned. "I'm a big fan of the uniforms."

"Is Hal your uncle?" Steve asked, gesturing behind him at the sign. The girl's eyes flicked up to it and her expression dulled a little. She nodded.

"I'm Christine." She leaned forwards over the counter. "Are you here for a car? I don't recognise you."

Steve cleared his throat, his gaze going to the taut muscles in her arms. The longer he looked at her, the less sure he was that he didn't recognise her. Perhaps they went to school together? Her bleached

hair clearly wasn't going to spark any old memories, but there was something in her face that seemed familiar: the blue eyes, maybe? Or the curve of her jaw? The bump in her nose? He tried to figure it out without making it obvious, and without missing a beat he replied to her question: "It's funny you say that, I need to pick up a car but it's not mine. Chief Hopper sent me."

"Right..." Christine narrowed her eyes a little and straightened. "That sounds a little—"

"Suspicious?" Steve finished. "Yeah, I told him that but he insisted. He's a busy guy. If you want we can give him a call to double-check."

Christine gave him a wry smile, "I'm just gonna—" She stuck her thumb over her shoulder to where the phone hung on the wall. "—You don't mind?"

"I don't mind." Steve repeated.

"Okay," Christine whispered, taking the phone off of the wall and dialling.

"Oh, the station might be closed." Steve realized. Christine waved a hand.

"No worries, I have his home phone." She had barely finished explaining when her call connected. "Hey, is that Hopper? It's Christine. I have Steve Harrington here saying you want him to pick up your car?"

Steve pretended not be listening as Christine hummed, laughed and nodded along with whatever Hopper was saying. After an excruciating length of time, Christine finally hung up.

"Your story checks out after all. Sorry for ever doubting you."

"It's no problem." Steve stuck his hands in his pockets and followed Christine as she came out from behind the counter. She stopped to grab a set of keys from a safe before leading him through a door into the adjoining warehouse. Christine was saying something about needing to move Billy's car when Steve couldn't hold his question in for any longer: "Do we know each other?"

Christine stopped and turned to look at him. "What do you mean?"

"You said my name on the phone to Hop." Steve said. "It's just... I don't remember where I know you from."

A strange look passed across Christine's face. "No, I'd just... I saw your staff card." She pointed, and sure enough Steve's lanyard was visible beneath his jacket.

"Oh," He said. It made sense, and yet Steve couldn't shake the feeling that he'd met her before. Christine turned away quickly and pressed the button to open the roller door, and then jumped into Billy's car. Steve stood back and waited for her to move it out of the way, and then he waited again when she went to get Hopper's car from further back into the workshop and bring it out front. When she climbed out she slapped the roof of the car. "All ready."

As Steve approached, he could hear Christine's fingers tapping against the roof of Hopper's car. That nervous energy she'd had when he first walked in had come back, and all of a sudden Steve felt like he couldn't just leave her alone.

"Hey, um..." He began. "With Billy... what did he want?"

"Oh, pfft." She rolled her eyes. "His car died, he just wants to make sure it's getting looked after. So no spilling nail polish in the driver's seat, I guess." She chuckled. "Don't worry, he wasn't even the worst I've had this week. I don't know if it's the heat or the cars dying, but people are acting nuts."

"At least you have your uncle around, right?"

"He's a bit under the weather at the moment. I blame you for that - too much ice cream."

"Do you work here alone? I bet it's a lot of work for one person."

"Yeah..." She admitted. "But, you know, what else am I going to do?"

Steve was about to say something about her getting another job, but he thought about all the people who had said the same thing to him and how that made him feel. People didn't understand that it was

never as easy as that. He imagined Christine's situation was similar. Still, he felt bad for leaving her alone. She might be able to shrug off Billy's behaviour now, but they both knew he'd come back sooner or later. Steve took a moment to think, and then he unhooked his backpack from his shoulder and rooted around until he found what he was looking for. Christine watched in silence, no doubt wondering if he was going to turn out to be an even worse customer than Billy, and when she caught sight of what he was holding her eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Here." He held out the radio.

"A walkie-talkie?"

"It's... I mean, it's a radio. Hopper has one too," It was a barefaced lie. In fact, he'd tried to give Hopper that very same radio that afternoon and the police chief had completely ignored him. "Just in case you get into any trouble with anyone. I know he's not the easiest person to get hold of sometimes."

"Does he know you're giving me this?"

"Uh... He mentioned it. Said something about the cars acting funny." The lies came out easier than he'd expected, and after a few seconds of deliberation Christine reached out and took the radio.

"Well, thanks. Any bad reviews and I'll be right on the line." Christine handed him the keys, and a thought suddenly came to him.

"I don't... Does Hopper need to pay anything?"

"Don't worry, I'll chase him for it." She waved the radio and Steve's expression made her laugh. "I'm joking. Emergencies only."

"Okay." Steve gave a nervous laugh before climbing into the car. It didn't take long for the doubts to creep up on him. *What are you doing, Steve?* He asked himself as he watched garage shrink in his rear-view mirror. But the memory of Billy's horrible smile, and the immediate anger it caused, was enough to justify his decision. He wanted to be there if Billy caused trouble. He wanted that chance.

He'd messed up too many things in his life. It was time to fix that.